Julius Valerius Maiorianus

(18 February / 28 December 457 - 2/7 August 461)

SOURCES

The emperor Julius Valerius Majorianus, or Majorian, is known primarily from fragments of evidence found either in jejune chronicles, such as those of the Spaniard Hydatius and Count Marcellinus (an easterner who wrote in Latin), or in extracts from writers whose complete works do not survive, such as the Byzantine writers Priscus, John of Antioch, and Malalas. The most insightful source is Sidonius Apollinaris, a Gallic aristocrat who was the son-in-law of the emperor **Eparchius Avitus**. Sidonius met Majorian during the emperor's campaign in Gaul in 458-459, and had dinner with him at least once in early 461. Sidonius not only provides a revealing personal vignette of the emperor, but he also composed an extant verse panegyric that provides our only connected account of Majorian's personal history and is the best source for his activities before becoming emperor

In addition, Majorian's domestic policies are much better known than those of the other "shadow" emperors of the last years of the western Roman Empire because of the survival of several of his legislative enactments, known as "Novels", which were preserved in the Breviarium, a compilation of Roman law published by Gallo-Roman jurists in 506 under the authority of the Visigothic king Alaric II (484-507). These laws may have made their way into Gallic archives during the course of Majorian's stays in Gaul during the years 458-461. They demonstrate the increasingly pervasive problems that the emperors had with maintaining the functioning of the imperial bureaucracy as self-interest and corruption became more and more rampant among government officials.

FAMILY BACKGROUND

Majorian's mother was the daughter of the Master of Soldiers Majorianus who was present at Sirmium in 379 when Theodosius I was made emperor. Majorian's father, whose name is unknown, held a financial office, possibly that of numerarius ("senior accountant"), on the staff of the western Master of Soldiers Aëtius (PLRE II, pp.1235-1236). Majorian's birthdate is unknown, but because Sidonius refers to him as a iuvenis ("young man") in 458, he perhaps was not born before ca.420.

EARLY LIFE

As a young man, Majorian embarked on a military career, and likewise served with Aëtius, probably in Gaul (Sidonius Apollinaris, Carm. 5. 198-200). In this capacity, he fought in one battle to defend Tours, and in another against the Franks at Vicus Helena, perhaps ca.448. According to Sidonius, "There was a narrow passage at the junction of two ways, and a road crossed both the village of Helena... and the river. [Aëtius] was posted at the cross-roads while Majorian warred as a mounted man close to the bridge itself..." (ibid. 5.207-227: Anderson trans., 1.76-81) At this time, Majorian served with the half-Sueve, half-Visigoth Ricimer and the Gaul Aegidius, both of whom later became powerful generals in their own right.

By 454, Majorian had left active service and retired to a country estate. Sidonius attributes this to the jealousy of Aëtius' wife, who supposedly feared that Majorian would outshine Aëtius ("livida coniunx ... suffusaque bili / coxerat internum per barbara corda venenum": Carm.5.126-128). After the murder of Aëtius in 454, Majorian was recalled by the emperor **Valentinian III** to assist in conciliating Aëtius' troops, and it may have been at this time that he was made comes domesticorum ("Count of the Domestics"). Sidonius noted, "So that he might with more safety win over the great hosts of his victim to join the Palatine bands, Valentinian prayerfully called on Majorian to come to him" (Carm. 5.305-308).

After **Valentinian's** own murder in 455, there was no obvious successor to the throne. Several candidates surfaced, as noted by John of Antioch:

"Rome was in a state of confusion and disturbance, and the military forces were divided among themselves, some wishing Maximus to assume the royal power and some eager to give the throne to Maximianus, the son of Domninus, an Egyptian merchant who had made his fortune in Italy; Maximianus had held the position of domesticus [bodyguard] of Aëtius. In addition, Eudoxia, the wife of Valentinian, strongly favored Majorian. But Maximus gained control of the palace by distributing money and forced Eudoxia to

marry him by threatening her with death, thinking that his position would be more secure. So Maximus came to the leadership of the Roman Empire "(fr.201.6: Gordon trans., pp.113-114)

So, in spite of having the support of Eudoxia (see also Sid.Apoll. Carm. 5.312-314), Majorian was unsuccessful in his bid for the throne and the choice fell upon the powerful senator **Petronius Maximus**, who made Majorian comes domesticorum if **Valentinian** had not already done so.

Maximus soon perished, during the Vandal sack of Rome in May 455, but any hopes that Majorian might have had of forwarding his own pretensions to the throne were preempted by the Gaul **Eparchius Avitus**, who was named Augustus in Gaul with the support of the Visigoths. Majorian, still Count of the Domestics, initially supported **Avitus**, as did Ricimer, now a military comes ("Count"), who defeated Vandal raiders in Sicily and off Corsica. But by mid-456 **Avitus'** popularity in Italy had waned, and Majorian and Ricimer revolted against him. In October, according to John of Antioch (fr.202),

"Majorian and Ricimer openly rebelled against Avitus, for they no longer feared the Goths... Attacking him on the road, Majorian and Ricimer compelled [Avitus] to flee to a holy precinct, renounce his office, and remove his royal raiment. Majorian did not withdraw until Avitus died of starvation."

Avitus' forces were defeated at Piacenza and Ravenna, and he died in early 457.

ACCESSION

Emperor Avitus

After **Avitus'** deposition Majorian initially bided his time, perhaps because he was hoping for recognition from the eastern emperor Marcian. But Marcian died on 27 January 457, presumably before he did anything regarding the west, and he was succeeded on 7 February by the general **Leo**, who likewise seems not to have been inclined to name a western emperor. Rather, on 28 February 457, Ricimer was officially designated patricius et magister militum ("Patrician and Master of Soldiers") and Majorian magister militum ("Master of Soldiers") ("his cons. Ricimer mag. mil. patricius factus est pridie kl. Martias et factus est Maiorianus mag. mil. ipso die": Fast.vind.prior.583). Such appointments could only have been made legally by **Leo**, so it would appear that **Leo** initially declined any request for imperial status for Majorian and responded instead by granting lesser honors to the two western generals. This would mean that, at least for the time being, **Leo** intended to rule as sole emperor.

In his magisterial capacity, Majorian sent a force under Count Burco against Alamanni invading from Raetia who eventually penetrated as far as Lake Maggiore. In his panegyric, Sidonius recounted to Majorian,

"The savage Alaman had scaled the Alps and had emerged, plundering the Roman land; he had sent 900 foemen to scour for booty... By this time you were Master [of Soldiers], and you sent forth Burco with a band of followers... Fortune brought about a triumph not through numbers but through their love of you... You fought with the authority of a Master but the destiny of an Emperor" (Carm. 5.373-385: Anderson trans., 1.94-95).

It may have been that this victory led to the acclamation of Majorian as Augustus on 1 April, probably by the army, six miles outside Ravenna at a place called "At the Little Columns" ("...et levatus est imp. d.n. Maiorianus kald. April. in miliario VI in campo ad Columellas": Fast.vind.prior.583).

Subsequent events, however, indicate that Leo did not immediately recognize Majorian's imperial status. Other sources state that Majorian did not become emperor until 28 December: "levatur Leo et Ravennae Maiorianus V kal. Ian." (Auct. Prosp. a.458). One might speculate that the latter months of the year 458 saw some delicate negotiations between Rome and Constantinople, and that Leo's concurrence was not received until the very end of the year. And agree he clearly did. The chronicler Marcellinus reported, "By the will of Leo Majorian was installed as emperor at Ravenna (s.a.457: "cuius voluntate Majorianus apud Ravennam Caesar est ordinatus"), and in 459 both Majorian and Leo were consuls, as was customary for emperors in their first full calendar year of rule. Both consulates were recognized in both the east and the west from the very beginning of the year, demonstrating that agreement on joint recognition had been reached in advance. Still, the gap between Majorian's initial and formal acclamations was an embarrassment; Sidonius dissimulated by asserting that Majorian initially had been reluctant to accept the thone: "The world trembled with alarm while you were loath to permit your victories to benefit you, and because, overly modest, you grieved because you deserved the throne and because you would not undertake to rule what you had deemed worth defending" (Carm. 5.9-12; for translation, cf. Anderson, 1.61).

Ensuing relations between Majorian and the eastern court likewise seem to have had their ups and downs. In 459, for example, Ricimer was named consul in the west, but was not recognized in the east; nor was the eastern consul Patricius acknowledged in the west. Nor would the eastern non-recognition of Ricimer have been a result of his barbarian heritage, for Patricius was the son of the barbarian Master of Soldiers Aspar. Subsequently, however, any differences must have been patched up, for in 460 and 461 east and west returned to recognizing each other's consuls. Otherwise, however, there seems to have been little interaction between the two courts, and any initiatives, military or civil, that Majorian undertook he shouldered on his own authority and using western resources.

On 11 January 458, two weeks after his formal installation, Majorian issued his first piece of legislation, which was entitled "On the Inception of the Rule of the Lord Emperor Majorian" ("De ortu imperii domini Majoriani Augusti", Novella Maioriani 1: trans. Pharr, p.551). In this maiden speech, delivered to but not at the Senate of Rome, Majorian laid forth the policies he planned to use in his governance of the empire:

"Emperor Majorian Augustus to the Senate: Know, O Conscript Fathers, that I have been made emperor by the decision of your election and by the ordination of our very gallant army... Also, on the Kalends consecrated to Janus We raised aloft the fasces of the consulship... Grant now your favor to the Emperor whom you have made, and share with Us the responsibility for matters that must be considered. No person shall fear the practices of informers... No one shall fear calumnies except those that he himself had originated. The watchful care of military affairs will be Our concern, as well as the concern of Our Father, the Patrician Ricimer..."

From the beginning of Majorian's reign, the pre-eminent position of the barbarian general Ricimer as a virtual "co-regent" was clear.

CONSOLIDATION OF AUTHORITY

Initially, Majorian controlled only Italy. In Gaul, Majorian's authority was openly disregarded, no surprise given his role in the deposition of the Gaul **Avitus**, and Spain was far beyond his reach. Africa and Britain were, it seemed, completely lost. Majorian spent nearly his entire reign attempting to consolidate his authority in areas of the empire that he did control, and to recover regions he did not. He spent all his time in northern Italy and the provinces; he is not known to have visited Rome. Even his initial address to the senate (Novella Maioriani 1) and his law forbidding the destruction of public buildings in Rome (Novella Maioriani 4: 11 July 458) were issued at Ravenna.

Italy

Early in Majorian's reign, even Italy was threatened. In a brief encounter in the summer of 458, a Vandal party raiding Campania was defeated and King Gaiseric's brother-in-law was killed. It may be in the context of these Vandal onslaughts that Majorian issued a directive, the text of which has been lost, entitled "On the Return of the Right to Bear Arms" ("De reddito iure armorum", Novella Maioriani 8). The emperor **Valentinian III** had issued a law with the same title in 440 (Novella Valentiniani 9) in response to earlier Vandal raids. And another law for which the text is lacking, entitled "Concerning Charioteers and Seditious Persons" ("De aurigis et seditiosis", Novella Maioriani 12), also may have been issued at this time of public unrest.

Majorian then turned his attentions to the recovery of the western provinces. Recognizing the importance of sea power, especially in the face of the Vandal threat, he apparently attempted to revitalize the western Roman fleet, which seems to have fallen into desuetude. Sidonius reported, "Meanwhile you built on the two shores fleets for the upper and lower sea. Down into the water falls every forest of the Apennines..." (Carm. 5.441-442: Anderson trans., 1.99). The two fleets perhaps were those stationed traditionally at Misenum and Ravenna on the Tuscan and Adriatic Seas. He also assembled an army largely comprised, as will be seen, of barbarian mercenaries.

Gaul

There are several indications of the initial Gallic disregard of Majorian's rule. In 458, for example, an inscription of 458 from Lyons was dated by the eastern consul alone, and pointedly ignored Majorian's consulate (CIL 13.2363, cf. 2359). And an archdeacon of Lyons was said to have traveled to the eastern court and requested the emperor **Leo** to remit the taxes on the city (Gregory of Tours, Glory of the Confessors 62), an incident which shows a blatant disregard of the jurisdiction of the western emperor. Indeed, a context for an embassy at this time is found in the year 458, when, according to the chronicler Marcellinus, "The emperor Leo sent individual letters speaking out on behalf of the Tome of Chalcedon to individual orthodox bishops throughout the entire world, so that all might demonstrate in their own responses what they felt. He received the unanimous letters of all these bishops..." One of these bishops would have been Eucherius of Lyons, and his response could have been delivered by the aforementioned archdeacon.

More seriously, there seems to have been another attempt in Gaul to endorse an imperial candidate. Sidonius makes a cryptic reference to a "Marcellan conspiracy for seizing the diadem" ("de capessendo diademate coniuratio Marcellana": Epist. 1.11.6; the manuscript reading "Marcellana" is correct, not "Marcelliniana" or "Marcellini", to which it generally has been emended) that occurred after the fall of **Avitus** and before the end of 458. The conspiracy somehow involved a person named Marcellus, of whom there are several attested in Gaul at this time, and may have been an attempt to put **Avitus** back on the throne after his deposition by Majorian and Ricimer. The only other individual known to have been involved was Paeonius, a rival of Sidonius (see below) who used the interregnum as an opportunity to usurp the office of Praetorian Prefect of Gaul. Whatever its details, the conspiracy apparently came to nought, perhaps because of **Avitus'** death.

In late 458, meanwhile, Majorian singled out Gaul for special attention when he decreed, "No [tax] collector is to refuse a solidus of full weight, except for the Gallic solidus, whose gold is appraised at a lesser value" ("nullus solidum integri ponderis recuset exactor, excepto eo gallico, cuius aurum minore aestimatione taxatur") (Novella Maioriani 7.14: 6 November 458). This probably is a reference to solidi, in Roman types, issued by the Visigoths.

Soon thereafter, with winter coming on, Majorian marched into Gaul. Sidonius rhetorically catalogued, in verse, the barbarian peoples who served in Majorian's army, whose names need no translation:

hoc totum tua signa pavet; Bastarna, Suebus,/Pannonius, Neurus, Chunus, Geta, Dacus, Halanus,/Bellonotus, Rugus, Burgundio, Vesus, Alites,/Bisalta, Ostrogothus, Procrustes, Sarmata, Moschus...

(Carm. 5.474-477).

The Visigoths, under king Theodoric II (453-464), were driven away from Arles and induced to return to their federate status. The Spanish chronicler Hydatius reported: "Legates sent by Nepotianus, the Master of Soldiers, and by Count Sunericus came to Gallaecia announcing that, after the Goths had been overcome in some sort of battle, the Emperor Majorian and King Theodoric had ratified the securest bonds of peace among themselves" (Chron. no.197, s.a.459 [the date of the arrival of the legates]). At about this time, Majorian also made the Gaul Aegidius, his old comrade-in-arms, Master of Soldiers in Gaul ("cui [Avito] Maiorianus successit. In Galliis autem Aegidius ex Romanis magister militum datus est": Gregory of Tours, Historia Francorum 2.11; cf. Priscus fr.30).

Then, with Visigothic support, Majorian expanded the territory under his control. The contemporary Byzantine historian Priscus reported, "Majorian, the emperor of the western Romans, when the Goths in Gaul were his allies, overcame the peoples living in his dominion, some by arms and some by diplomacy" (Priscus, fr.27: Gordon trans., pp.116-117). Majorian advanced up the Rhone valley. The Burgundians were defeated and, after being besieged and captured, Lyons had a ruinous indemnity imposed upon it.

Soon, however, Majorian's attitude changed from being punitive to being conciliatory. In early January, 459, with the mediation of Majorian's magister epistularum ("Chief of Correspondence") Petrus, **Avitus'** son-in-law Sidonius Apollinaris was permitted to deliver a panegyric praising the emperor's sterling qualities (Carm.5) Majorian then proposed a much more magnanimous Gallic settlement; indeed, it could hardly have been otherwise if he hoped to conciliate the Gauls. For example, the tax remission that the inhabitants of Lyons had requested from Leo was granted (Sid.Apoll. Carm.5.574-585). And it may have been on this occasion that Sidonius himself was accorded the title of comesspectabilis ("Respectable")which allowed Sidonius to outrank the great majority of his senatorial cousins. As for Paeonius, his irregular prefecture was legitimized, but he also was immediately replaced.

Coinage from Arelate depicting Majorian

Spain and Africa

Following the recovery of Gaul, Majorian turned his attentions to Spain, where the Visigoths had been expanding enthusiastically since 455. Hydatius notes that Majorian entered Spain in May, 459. Majorian' goals were twofold: he not only wished to restore Roman authority in Spain, but he also wanted to use it as a base for an invasion of Africa, the richest region of the western empire, which was held by Gaiseric's Vandals. Majorian began to assemble an invasion fleet, and Procopius provides a rather fanciful account of his preparations:

"Majorian, who had gained the power of the west, also deserves mention... This Majorian,who surpassed in every virtue all who have ever been emperors of the Romans, did not bear lightly the loss of Libya, but collected a very considerable army against the Vandals and came to Liguria, intending himself to lead the army against the enemy. For Majorian never showed the least hesitation before any task and least of all before the dangers of war. But thinking it not inexpedient for him to investigate first the strength of the Vandals and the character of Gaiseric and to discover how the Moors and Libyans stood with regard to friendship or hostility toward the Romans, he decided to trust no eyes other than his own in such a matter. Accordingly, he set out as if he was an envoy from the emperor to Gaiseric, assuming some fictitious name... And when he came before Gaiseric, the barbarian attempted in many ways to terrify him, and... he brought him into the place where all the weapons were stored... Thereupon they say that the weapons shook of their own accord and gave forth a sound of no ordinary or casual sort, and then it seemed to Gaiseric that there had been an earthquake... He was not able to comprehend the meaning of what had happened... So Majorian, having accomplished the very things he wished, returned to Liguria and leading his army on foot, [Majorian] came to the Pillars of Hercules, intending to cross over the strait at that point, and then to march by land from there against Carthage. And when Gaiseric became aware of this, and perceived that he had been tricked by Majorian in the matter of the embassy, he became alarmed and made his preparations for war. And the

Romans, basing their confidence on the valor of Majorian, already began to have good hopes of recovering Libya for the empire (Procopius, Bellum Vandalicum 7.4-13: Dewing trans., pp.65-69)

Even if one doubts that Majorian undertook a secret mission to Africa himself (and Procopius, ibid. 4.1-11, tells a similar story about a meeting between Gaiseric and the future emperor Marcian), the tale may very well reflect intelligence gathering that went on prior to the planned invasion.

The early course of the preparations against the Vandals is discussed by Priscus:

"Majorian even attempted to cross over to Libya with a great force, after he had collected about three hundred ships. The ruler of the Vandals first sent envoys to him to resolve the disagreements by diplomacy. When the emperor was not persuaded, he laid waste all the land of the Moors to which Majorian and his troops had to cross from Spain and harassed the surrounding waters (Priscus, fr.27: Gordon trans., pp.116-117)

Gaiseric, therefore, was quite concerned about the possibility of an invasion -- no surprise, perhaps, given the defeats he had suffered in the past at the hands of Ricimer and Majorian -- and suggested a diplomatic solution. When that failed, he adopted a scorched-earth policy in the territory where he anticipated that Majorian would land.

Majorian, meanwhile, continued to extend his influence in Spain, and while he was thus distracted, disaster struck. The Gallic Chronicle of 511 noted, "As he was planning to cross to Africa, his ships were captured by the Vandals near Cartagena in Spain" ("qui volens Africam proficisci naves eius in Hispaniis a Wandalis captae sunt iuxta Carthaginem Spartariam": no.634), and Marius of Avenches was a bit more specific, stating, wrongly under the year 460, "...the emperor Majorian set out for Spain. In this year his ships were captured by the Vandals at Elche near Cartagena" ("Maiorianus imperator profectus est ad Hispanias. Eo anno captae sunt naves a Vandalis ad Elecem iuxta Cartaginem Spartariam"). Some would identify "Elica" as Alicanta, nearly eighty miles to the north of Cartagena, but the ancient town of Elche, only forty miles north, seems more likely.

Hydatius provides some additional background: "While Majorian was campaigning in the province of Carthaginiensis the Vandals destroyed, through traitors, several ships that he was preparing for himself for a crossing against the Vandals from the shore of Carthaginiensis. Majorian, frustrated in this manner from his intention, returned to Italy" (Chron. 200, s.a. 460). Gaiseric again sought a settlement, but this time from a position of power: "King Gaiseric, through ambassadors, demanded peace from the emperor Majorian" (Hydatius, Chron. 209, s.a.460). Majorian, far from his home base and perhaps threatened, in light of the Vandal debacle, with the collapse of the shaky coalition that he had pasted together, was compelled to accede. According to John of Antioch, "Majorian broke off the war on disgraceful terms and departed" (fr.203: Gordon trans., p.117). The settlement perhaps gave imperial recognition to the Vandal possession of the western African provinces of Mauretania, which had been allocated to the Romans in the previous treaty of 442 but were soon occupied by the Vandals. Majorian then began his return to Italy, stopping for a time in Arles.

Military Campaigns of Emperor Majorian from 458 to 461

DOMESTIC POLICIES

Majorian realized it took more to stabilize the state than force of arms. He implemented a number of domestic policies designed to deal with existing problems and abuses, and to ensure the long-term viability of the state.

Relations with the Senatorial Aristocracy

During the first two centuries of the Principate, most emperors had realized how critical it was to maintain a good working relation with the Senate and the senatorial order. Third-century emperors, however, generally had reduced the authority and the role of the senate, with the result that many senators focused increasingly on aggrandizing their personal, and in particular their local, authority. Conflicts of interest resulted. Powerful senators often avoided paying taxes. The old social system was breaking down as senators consolidated their local authority and used their influence to the detriment of the state, of smaller landowners, and of the decurions, the members of local town councils who, oppressed by debt, sometimes simply abandoned their status. Majorian, therefore, was faced with the need to deal with a powerful western senatorial aristocracy that was accustomed to looking out for its own interests, and saw little benefit in having a vigorous emperor and a strong central government.

Western senators saw public office not only as their right, but also as a means for expanding their own personal influence. Majorian could not change this. But he did have some latitude in his choice of officials. He appears to have favored individuals with ties to northern Italy, or even to Gaul. As Praetorian Prefect of Italy, for example, he appointed Fl. Caeina Decius Basilius, who in 467 was identified as a potential patron of Sidonius Apollinaris (Sid.Apoll. Epist. 1.9.3-4). His Count of the Privy Purse was Ennodius, whose name suggests a connection with the family of Ennodius, bishop of Pavia, which had strong connections to Arles. And the Master of Correspondence Petrus, who served as Sidonius' intermediary in 458, was said to have had interests in Liguria, which bordered on Gaul (Sid.Apoll. Epist. 9.13.5 carm.110-13: "civitatum ... amor Ligusticarum"). All of this could suggest that, given the constraints within which he operated, Majorian attempted to cobble together a central administration that would be less Italo-centric than those in the past and would have assisted in his conciliation of the Gallo-Roman aristocracy.

After 458, moreover, Majorian spent nearly all of his reign outside Italy. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that his appointments had a provincial, non-Italian flavor. He made Ricimer the consul for 459, a designation that, as has been seen, was rejected in the east. The western consul for 460 was the influential Gallo-Roman aristocrat Magnus, whom Majorian had named Praetorian Prefect of Gaul in late 458, probably after his occupation of Arles, in place of the usurper Paeonius. This choice underlined Majorian's desire to conciliate the Gallic aristocracy. Majorian's final consular nomineee, for 461, was Fl. Severinus, apparently an Italian (CIL 6.32206), who was present with Majorian in Gaul. He was praised by Sidonius as "a man always of equal authority during manifold changes in rulers and the uneven condition of the Republic" (Epist. 1.11.10). This comment would suggest that Severinus had had an influential position during the reign of **Avitus**, and this consideration, coupled with his presence in Gaul, again indicates that Majorian chose his officials with an eye toward satisfying both his Italian and Gallic constituencies.

Sidonius Apollinaris provides a revealing vignette of how Majorian interacted with the senatorial aristocracy. It already has been seen that in his "declaration of intention" to the Senate on 11 January 458, Majorian had promised, "No person shall fear the practices of informers... No one shall fear calumnies except those that he himself had originated." This was an issue of great concern to senators, for throughout Roman history senators had had cause to fear delatores ("informers"), who were always ready to betray their fellows in the hope of gain or advancement.

A specific case occurred in early 461, when Majorian was in Arles after returning from Spain. It seems that an anonymous satire that "named names" was circulating, and Sidonius was accused of being the author by his rival, the aforementioned Paeonius. In a letter to his friend Montius, Sidonius described the denouement of this affair:

"In the reign of Majorian, an anonymous but very biting satire in verse was circulated at court; gross in its invective, it took advantage of unprotected names... its attack was above all personal... I came to Arles suspecting nothing... The next day I paid my duty to the emperor... The emperor commanded my presence at the banquet he was giving on the occasion of the games... When the dinner was well advanced... the emperor turned round to me and said, "It is news to me, Count Sidonius, that you are a writer of satires." "Sire," I replied, "It is news to me too." "Anyhow," he replied with a laugh, "I beg you to be merciful to me." "I shall spare myself also," I rejoined, "by refraining from illegality." Thereupon the emperor said, "What shall we do, then, to the people who have accused you?" "This, Sire," I answered, "Whoever my accuser be, let him come out into the open. If I am proven guilty, let me suffer the penalty. But if, as is likely, I rebut the charge, I ask of Your Clemency permission to write anything I choose about my assailant, provided I observe the law." The emperor ... replied, "I agree to your conditions, if you can put them in verse on the spot." ... I replied,

Who says I write satires? Dread soverign, I cry,

Let him prove his indictment, or pay for his lie.

Then the emperor proclaimed, "I call God and the common welfare to witness that in future I give you license to write what you please; the charge brought against you was not susceptible of proof. It would be most unjust if the imperial decision allowed such latitude to private quarrels that evident malice might imperil by obscure charges nobles whom conscious innocence puts wholly off their guard..." (Epist.1.11.2-15: Dalton trans., 1.26-33. and Hodgkin trans., 2.425).

In this case, at least, Majorian lived up to his promise to pay no heed to informers and false accusations.

Social and Economic Policies

Before leaving for Gaul, Majorian issued a spate of legislation attempting to deal with several pressing social and, in particular, economic issues, many of which concerned, in one way or another, imperial income. As noted above, provincial potentates were increasingly dissociating their own interests from those of the imperial government. In March of 458 Majorian complained about one manifestation of this tendency: "This is the method of powerful persons, whose agents in the provinces disregard the payment of taxes, while ... they arrogantly keep to their estates" ("ratio est potentium personarum, quarum actores per provincias solutionem fiscalium neglegunt, sum ... se in praediis retinent contumaces," (Novella Maioriani 2.4: 11 March 458).

One problem was that, for many, the tax arrears had accumulated to such an extent that it was unrealistic to expect that they ever would be paid. And if the arrears could not be paid, the taxes that were currently due would not be paid either. Majorian responded by issuing to the Praetorian Prefect of Italy Basilius, on 11 March 458, the law just cited, entitled "On the Remission of Past-Due Accounts" cancelling all past-due taxes:

"The afflicted fortunes of the provincials have been exhausted by a varied and multiple exaction of tribute and by extraordinary burdens of fiscal payments, and thus they have lost the substance for the payment of the customary tax, and they have experienced a collapse also in the case of those taxes that they should justly have been paid... the landowner... is overwhelmed by the burden of an obligation that has been heaped into one mass... Therefore, by a law that shall remain eternally, We sanction that delinquent taxes of all fiscal tax accounts ... up to the beginning of the present year shall not be required of the landholders. These delinquent taxes We remit, under the benefit of a general indulgence, to those taxpayers who are obligated... "("De indulgentiis reliquorum", Novella Maioriani 2: Pharr trans., pp.551-553).

In doing this, Majorian would have been following the example set by the eastern emperor Marcian in 450.

In the same law, Majorian also attempted to deal with a problem created by the illegal collection of taxes by imperial officials who were not authorized to do so:

"The apparitors of the prefects and the palatine office and those of other offices have undertaken the collection of the statutory tax accounts; contrary to the custom of the ancients they scurry about the provinces and by enormous exactions they ruin the landholder and the decurion, they extort all things in accordance with their desire for their own looting to such an extent that when some definite or very small portion of the tax is delivered to the public accounts, such greedy and very powerful enforcement officers receive double the amount, or more, as fees... In order that the venal wickedness of the collectors of the regular tax may not further bring ruin to public and private fortunes, the ancient custom shall be restored and the entire administration of the tax collection shall be the responsibility of the governors of the provinces, through whose offices we order the annual tax collections to be exacted." (ibid.).

A related problem involved the decurions, mentioned in the law just cited, who were members of town councils and were responsible for making good on taxes that were not collected. As a result of abuses by the rich and powerful, the decurion class was being ruined. For some, the only recourse was to attempt to escape their status altogether. In a lengthy ruling issued, again to the prefect Basilius, on 6 November 458, and entitled "On Decurions and Regarding Relationship and the Alienation of Property and Other Matters", Majorian attempted not only to relieve some of the pressure on the decurions but also to regulate them even further:

"But the iniquity of the judges and the punishable venality of the tax collectors have brought it about that many decurions are deserting their municipalities... and choosing secret hiding places and residences on the rustic estates of others. They also bring upon themselves the added disgrace that, since they wish to enjoy the patronage of powerful persons, they pollute themselves by unions with colonae (tenant farmers) and slave women... We remit the punishment for past presumption... A decurion shall never alienate his landed estates... "("De curialibus et de agnatione vel distractione praediorum et de ceteris negotiis", Novella Maioriani 7: Pharr trans., pp.557-560).

For decurions who did not have the means or desire to escape their status, often the only recourse was to squeeze the plebeians, the mass of the population who ranked beneath them. Realizing this, and in an attempt to make municipal government more viable, Majorian proposed in a law issued two months later to revive the position of defensor civitatis ("City Defender"), whose duty was to protect the plebeians of a municipality from oppression, especially with regard to tax collection ("De defensoribus civitatum", Novella Maioriani 3: 8 May 458). The problem with this approach was that those eligible for the position often were those guilty of the oppression.

Another law, issued on 4 September 458, attempted to increase imperial income by recovering resources due to the fisc that, like tax income, were being diverted by imperial officials. In response to a report of the Count of the Privy Purse Ennodius, Majorian issued a ruling entitled "On Abandoned Property and That of Proscribed Persons": "We approve the report of Your Sublimity, whereby you call to Our attention that the profits of the fisc are being suppressed throughout the provinces in many cases by the venality of the judges" ("De bonis caducis sive proscriptorum", Novella Maioriani 5: Pharr trans., p.554). Ennodius was ordered to "admonish the judges of the provinces... that they shall refrain from such frauds..." One can only wonder how effective that this pronouncement was.

Another law apparently also was intended to restrict illegal seizures of property by government officials. Only the heading survives, reading "Neither a senator of the city of Rome nor a church should be compelled to render to the fisc anything bequeathed by certain persons..." ("Neque senatorem urbis Romae neque ecclesiam ex testamento sibi a certis personis aliquid relictum fisco inferre cogendum et de populis urbicis", Novella Maioriani 10). And a lengthy ruling of 26 October 458, entitled "On Women Religious and Widows and Concerning their Inheritances" ("De sanctimonialibus vel viduis et de successionibus earum," Novella Maioriani 6), sought to safeguard the interests of children and to protect women from inheritance hunters.

Finally, two laws published after Majorian's departure from Italy concerned personal activities and status. One, issued 17 April 459 in Gaul and addressed to Rogatianus, governor of Etruria, reprimanded the governor for punishing an adulterer merely with "temporary exile by relegation" rather than death, and specified that adulterers were to be sentenced to deportation and confiscation of property ("De Adulteriis", Novella Maioriani 9). And Novella Maioriani 11, entitled "On Episcopal Judgment and Lest a Cleric be Ordained Unwillingly and Regarding Other Matters" ("De episcopali iudicio et ne quis invitus clericus ordinetur vel de ceteris negotiis") and issued 28 March 460 at Arles to "the Illustrious Ricimer, Count and Master of both Services and Patrician", forbade forcible ordinations, such as when persons were made clerics in order to exclude them from inheritance. This issuance of this law, dealing with a civil matter, to Ricimer, a military official, attests to the Patrician's great influence in the state.

CONSERVATION OF MONUMENTS

From the beginning of the 4th century, the monuments of Rome, and more generally all buildings of some value that were in a state of neglect for various reasons, were increasingly used as quarries for valuable building materials. This practice, in fact, was cheaper and more convenient than import from remote locations, which was sometimes rendered difficult or impossible by the control of the sea by the Vandals, officials conceded upon petition the use for construction of marble, stone and brick recovered from demolition of ancient monuments:

“Hence the occasion now arises that also each and every person who is constructing a private edifice through the favoritism of the judges who are situated in the City, does not hesitate to take presumptuously and to transfer the necessary materials from the public places, although those things which belong to the splendor of the cities ought to be preserved by civic affection, even under the necessity of repair.” —Novella Maioriani 4, Clyde Pharr (ed.), The Theodosian code: and Novels The Lawbook Exchange, Ltd.,
To cope with this phenomenon, Majorian promulgated a law, Novella Maioriani 4, De aedificiis pubblicis ("Public Buildings"), in Ravenna on 11 July 459, addressed to Aemilianus, praefactus urbi of Rome. The punishment for judges who had allowed the destruction of ancient public buildings was 50 pounds of gold, while their subordinates were whipped and had both hands amputated. Those who had removed materials from public buildings were to return them. The Senate had the power to decide whether there were extreme conditions that justified the demolition of an old building and, if it decided for the demolition, the Emperor still had the right to order that the resulting materials should be used to decorate other public buildings.

COINAGE

Majorian's coinage (see Kent, RIC) also gives some insight into his policies. Consular solidi issued at Ravenna were probably among his earliest coins. The reverse depicts Majorian and **Leo** as consuls, and suggests, as noted above, that the two emperors had agreed upon mutual recognition. Majorian also issued tremisses at Ravenna, but is not known to have issued any semisses at all; the latter denomination was customarily issued at Rome, and no known gold coinage for Majorian was issued there, probably because Majorian never went there. Milan also struck solidi and tremisses analogous to those of Ravenna from the very beginning of Majorian's reign. Bronze coins, ca. 2.0 gm., also were issued at Milan and Ravenna. A few contorniates also were issued; most were associated with Rome, although a consular variety, perhaps from early 458, may have been from Ravenna.

Beginning in late 458, solidi also were struck at Arles, indicating Majorian's presence in Gaul. One obverse die was brought from Ravenna to get the coinage underway, but others were made locally. Later solidi were issued at Arles after Majorian's return from Spain in late 460. These Arlesian coins served as prototypes for Visigothic copies, which may have been issued in connection with the treaty with the Goths in 459. No tremisses were issued at Arles, with the curious result that Visigothic tremisses copied the designs of the solidus because there were no tremisses to use as patterns. Surviving silver siliquae and half-siliquae issued in the name of Majorian probably were not struck by him at all. They are found in Gaul, and may have been issued after his death by his ally Aegidius, who was in revolt against the Italian government. They provided a precedent for similar, later, silver coins in the names of **Anthemius** and **Nepos** which may have been issued in northern Gaul either by Roman hold-outs or by the Franks.

DEPOSITION AND DEATH

In late July of 461 Majorian returned from Gaul to Italy. John of Antioch reported what then happened: "While he was still on the way to Italy, Ricimer plotted his death. When Majorian had dismissed the allies after their return and was going home to Rome with his attendants, Ricimer and his party arrested him, stripped him of his purple robe and diadem, beat him, and beheaded him. Thus ended Majorian's life" (fr.203; Gordon trans, p.117). The Gallic Chronicle of 511 confirms that it was from Arles that Majorian set out: "Moreover, having set out from Arles for Italy, he was killed by the patrician Ricimer at Tortona."

Hydatius provides some additional insight into the circumstances of Majorian's fall: "Ricimer, aroused by envy and supported by the counsel of jealous persons, surrounded and treacherously killed Majorian while he was returning from Gaul to Rome and was in the

process of arranging things that were necessary for the Roman name and empire" ("Maiorianum de Galliis Romam redeuntem et Romano imperio vel nomini res necessarias ordinantem, Rechimer, livore percitus et invidorum consilio fultus, fraude interficit circumventum": Chron. 210). The Fasti vindobonenses priores (no.588) report succinctly, "During this consulate the Emperor Majorian was deposed by the patrician Ricimer at Tortona on 3 August and killed at the Ira River on 7 August ("his cons depositus est Maiorianus imp. a patricio Ricimere Dertona III non. Aug. et occisus est ad Fluvium Ira VII idus Aug."). The chronicler Marcellinus reported, "The Emperor Majorian was killed at Tortona, near the river that is called Ilyra" ("Majorianus Caesar apud Dertona, iuxta fluvium qui Ilyra dicitur, interemptus est": Chron. s.a.461). Victor of Tonnena, however, mistakenly reported that Majorian was killed at Rome, and in 463 at that ("Maiorianus Romae occiditur": Chron. s.a.463). And Procopius, who seems not to have known the result of Majorian's Vandal campaign, erroneously assumed that Majorian remained in Spain, reporting, "But meantime Majorian was attacked by the disease of dysentery and died, a man who had shown himself moderate toward his subjects, and an object of fear to his enemies" (Bellum Vandalicum 7.14-15: Dewing trans., p.69).

Ricimer struck when Majorian was most vulnerable: after he had dismissed his allies, who owed their loyalty to Majorian and not Ricimer, and before Majorian was able to re-establish himself in Italy. Majorian might have known better, for it was in just this way that he and Ricimer had subdued **Avitus**, after the latter had dismissed his Gothic allies. Nor did Ricimer act alone; he was in fact the standard-bearer of a conspiracy of "jealous" individuals. The cause of their jealousy might be sought in the "necessary things" that Majorian was undertaking. Majorian had demonstrated in the past a willingness to attack the root causes of some of the social and economic problems facing the empire. These "problems," however, were the very means being used by many senators to expand their own power and influence. Majorian posed a threat to the continued aggrandizement of powerful Italian senators, and in this instance their interests were the same as those of Majorian's erstwhile supporter but now rival Ricimer, who, after Majorian's execution, was able to install an emperor more to his liking, as reported by the Consularia constantinopolitana: "During this consulate Majorian was killed and Severus was made emperor" ("His conss Maiorianus occiditur et Severus efficitur imperator": s.a. 461).

EPILOGUE

After the fall of Majorian, the Gallic generalissimo Aegidius rebelled against Ricimer and the Italian government, and even went so far as to enter into negotiations with the Vandals (Priscus, fr.30). Majorian had offered the last and best hope of the post-Valentinian, post-Aëtius period to revitalize the western empire. After his death, the authority of western emperors was limited almost exclusively to Italy, where there was rampant squabbling among barbarian generals (Ricimer, Gundobad, Orestes), figure-head emperors (**Severus**, **Olybrius**, **Glycerius**, **Romulus)**, eastern intruders (**Anthemius**, **Julius Nepos**), and powerful, self-centered senators.

"[Majorian] presents the welcome discovery of a great and heroic character, such as sometimes arise, in a degenerate age, to vindicate the honour of the human species". – Edward Gibbon

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